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HOPEFULNESS Vs HOPELESSNESS

(A STUDY OF ANTON CHEKHOV'S "THE LAMENT" AND THOMAS HARDY'S "AH, ARE YOU DIGGING ON MY GRAVE?")

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ABSTRACT



Anton Chekhov's short story *The Lament* and Thomas Hardy's poem "Ah, Are You Digging On My Grave?" exposes in two different ways the human nature to its stark reality: the meanness, selfishness and self-centeredness of human beings. One is a hopeful picture and the other is devoid of hope. Chakhov's short story attacks the ideal of Universal Brotherhood through the acute loneliness felt by the protagonist, a cab driver while living in the midst of hustle and bustle of life. The cabdriver does not get even a single person in the ruthless society to unburden his grief-stricken heart. In the end, the inability to bear the agony and the apathy of the fellow human beings drove the father (cabdriver) to find an emotional refuge in his horse. In Chekhov's story, the situation is not completely dark. At the end of the story, the horse of the cabdriver comes to his rescue and the horse becomes a means to express the helplessness of a human being at the hands of fellow human beings. Also, there is a solace that one is missed and remembered after death. That's why, it gets intolerably tough for the father to get along with his life after the loss of his son.

In Hardy's poem, there is no hope. As soon as one is departed to the other world, one is banished from the mind. One is forgotten in one's own house, leave alone the concern for whole world. People are so engaged in their own lives, that there is no time to keep mourning the dead. One is no longer required, no longer missed. It is so easy for the members of the family, relatives and even one's foe to forget one and move on in life. In Chekhov's story, an animal can be banked upon but in Hardy's poem, even that refuge is wanted.

Keywords: self-centeredness, self-indulgent, grief, fidelity, share, animal, refuge, hopeless

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Anton Chekhov's short story *The Lament* is a lament on the self-indulgent and apathy of the human world. The narrative presents a situation in which a person (a cabdriver, Iona Potapov) yearns to get some relief by sharing his grief with somebody,

"...one must tell it slowly and carefully, how his son fell ill, how he suffered, what he said before he died, how he died. One must describe every detail of the funeral, and the journey to the hospital to fetch the dead son's clothes. His daughter Anissia has

remained in the village-one must talk about her too." (*The Lament: Anton Chekhov*) But in this self-indulgent world, not even a single could squeeze some time and lend his sympathetic ear to him where he could have poured his grief. "...With an anxious and hurried look, he searches among the crowds passing on either side of the street to find whether her may be just one person who will listen to him. But the crowds hurry by without noting him or his trouble...." (*The Lament: Anton Chekhov*) His several attempts with the passengers are foiled by them. He has a strong sense of loneliness and despair unmindful of what he gets as fare, he wants to have someone or the other as fare in his cab so that he might tell his story. The passengers rather assault him with emotional violence and threaten him of physical violence. They abuse and pester him to drive faster instead of sympathizing with him. But he "listens to the insults hurled at him, sees the people, and little by little the feeling of loneliness leaves him." (*The Lament: Anton Chekhov*) The cabdriver finds his solace in his horse. "He sees it is useless to turn to people for help"..... "The little horse munches, listens and breathes over its master's hand..." (*The Lament: Anton Chekhov*) The horse seems to have sympathized with his master in its own way.

The short story is a critique of the ruthlessness of the social reality. Its incapacity to sympathies with a fellow human being. It decries the human nature which cannot accommodate person's suffering. Human beings are shown as self-centered and bereft of humane qualities.

Thomas Hardy's poem, "Ah, Are You Digging On My Grave?" exposes the pretensions and transitory nature of human relationships. The poem is a dialogue between a dead woman who speaks from her grave and an intruder disturbing her peace by digging on it. The woman inquires if the digger is her husband, thinking the husband might be missing her,

"Ah, are you digging on my grave
My loved one?-planting rue?" (*Ah, Are You Digging On My Grave?*)

But the digger replies in the negative and informed her that her husband has got married to some

affluent woman. Then she guesses that it might be her relative,

"Then who is digging on my grave?
My nearest dearest kin?" (*Ah, Are You Digging On My Grave?*)

But the intruder acquaints her with the fact that her relatives are resigned to a life without her. Still hopeful, the dead woman asks if it is her enemy. But even her enemy is no longer interested in her,

"....She thought you no more worth her hate,

And cares not where you lie."

The dog then told the dead woman that it is digging on her grave.

"O it is I, my mistress dear,
Your little dog..." (*Ah, Are You Digging place On My Grave?*)

The dead woman is overwhelmed with dog's fidelity. But the dog is digging only to burry a bone for future use. It also forgets that it is the resting place of its mistress. The confession reverses the situation. Even her dog, like everyone else, has forgotten her.

Thomas Hardy's attack on the selfishness and self-centeredness of human beings is more severe than Chekhov's. At least, Chekhov has pinned his hopes on an animal but hardy's view is more discouraging. For Chekhov, animals can be banked upon for emotional solace. So, there is some hope for the human beings. But Hardy refuses to give that last hope also. He uses a dog as an intruder on the grave. 'Dog' which is considered to be one of the most faithful animals. Here the dog is only concerned about the bone which it is hiding under the earth. It is least bothered about its mistress's grave. This poem gives a blow to all the relationships a person can have in his life. He exposes the charade of human relationships. Hardy's view is hopeless where the last hope given by Chekhov is rejected by Hardy. He presents the most faithful animal as selfish and without devotion for its master. Just like human beings, the dog also forgets that it is its mistress's grave,

"I am sorry, but I quite forget
It was your resting place." (*Ah, Are You Digging place On My Grave?*) ."

In Hardy's view, there is no refuge for human beings. As soon as they depart from this world, they are

resigned to oblivion. Even when they are alive, they remain each other's concern so long as they serve each other's selfish motives. When they fail to serve each other's purpose, relations are severed. That is why, the bereaved husband of the dead woman gets married to an opulent lady, her relatives, pet and even her enemy considers her no more worthy of their concern. They get busy in their own lives.

But on the other hand, in Chekhov's story, the bereaved father is yearning to share the grief of his son's death with somebody to lighten the burden of his heart. His grief which knows no bounds: "...it is such an immense, illimitable grief. Should his heart break and the grief pour out, it would flow over the whole earth, so it seems, and yet no one sees it. It has managed to conceal itself in such an insignificant shell that no one can see it even by day with a light." (*The Lament*: Anton Chekhov) His son is not forgotten as soon as he dies. Instead, the memory of the dead son torments him each and every moment. He longs to talk about his son with somebody. He bears insults hurled at him by different passengers in his cab just in the hope that they will lend him a sympathetic ear. He can tell them his tale of woes and give some relief to his bruised heart.

The wretchedness and loneliness felt by Iona Potapov is expressed with the help of passengers in his cab, a hall porter, a young cabdriver who represent the society at large and its ruthlessness is evident from their indifference towards the pathetic condition of the cabdriver.

Thus Hardy's narrative in the poetic form, presents a picture of utter hopelessness. One feels repugnant at the transience and meanness of human relationships as against the hopeful situation where one is not rendered to oblivion but longed for and cried about after one's departure from this world.

REFERENCES

1. *The Lament*: Anton Chekhov
2. *Ah, Are You Digging On My Grave?*: Thomas Hardy